An Adamant Young Man
April 7, 1968
Mark 10:32-34
Palm Sunday

Bethany Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Buchanan

When he died, Dag Hammarskjold left an indelible mark on the organization of which he was the head - The United Nations. He left his mark on history as well, of which he was a student, and in which he was an enthusiastic participant. Through the stormy and lonely years of his public life, Hammarskjold kept a diary of sorts - a running record of his thoughts and ideas. He let it be known to those who were close to him that should his life be worth remembering it was his wish that the contents of his diary be remembered also.

The diary was published posthumously, under the simple title, Markings. The title of this sermon comes from one of the entries, dated sometime in 1951. Let me read part of it to you.

"A young man, adamant in his committed life. The one who was nearest to him relates how, on the last evening, he rose from supper, laid aside his garments and washed the feet of his friends and disciples - an adamant young man, alone as he confronted his final destiny.

"He had observed their mean play for his - his!- friendship. He knew that not one of them had the slightest conception of why he had to act the way he must. He knew how frightened and shaken they would all be. And one of them had informed on him, and would probably soon give the signal to the police.

"He had assented to a possibility in his being, of which he had had his first inkling when he returned from the desert. If God required anything of him, he would not fail. Only recently, he thought, had he begun to see more clearly, and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the cross. He knew, though, that he had to follow it, still uncertain as to whether he was 'the one who shall bring it to pass', but certain that the answer could only be learned by following the road to the end. The end might be a death without significance - as well as being the end of the road of possibility.....

"A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end, without self pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he has chosen - even sacrificing affection and fellowship when the others are unready to follow him - into a new fellowship." (p. 68, Markings, Alfred A. Knopf, 1965)

Of course, the Secretary General of the United Nations was referring to Jesus Christ, and his very insightful statement started me thinking about the real meaning of Palm Sunday. On the surface it seems like an uncomplicated event. There is the charismatic leader with his loyal following, the humble king welcomed joyfully into the Holy City of Jerusalem. There is an element of political intrigue;- Judas, nursing his hope that the noisy entry into Jerusalem would stimulate and coordinate all the dissident elements to bring about a general revolt against Rome; Judas - sensing that he had been misled, making final preparations to betray him. There was the blackmail of the High Priests and religious authorities, working behind the scenes to set the stage for his quick trial and execution. There was the crowd: now for him, now against him: now laying Palm branches befor o the humble processional, shouting "Hosanna"; now spitting upon him shouting "Crucify Him!"

But rising about the crowded drama of Palm Sunday, with all its actors passing briefly on the stage, is the figure of one lonely man; one man who had been tortured by doubt and misgiving; one man who, alone, had to make a terrible decision, and having made that decision, was now following it through to its terrible conclusion.

It is this thought that caught the imagination of Dag Hammarskjold, and my imagination as I reread his words: that is, the immense difficulty of Jesus' decision to go to the city in the first place, and the immense risk involved in following through with that decision. Hammarskjold saw in this, I am sure, a

prototype for all men who must make difficult decisions.

I want to pursue that thought this morning, trying to understand what his decision meant to Jesus: looking at it in light of the tragic events in the life of our nation last week, and finally in light of the small struggles of life in which you and I find ourselves.

The decision to go to Jerusalem during the Passover celebration must have been difficult; the risks were tremendous. The city was crowded with Passover celebrants; people who had come to the city for the express purpose of remembering their nation's deliverance from hated foreign oppression centuries before. Emotion could easily be fanned to a flame during the Passover. But he decided to go, and the manner in which he decided to go was the most provocative act of all. He could have slipped into the city unnoticed: he and friends could have celebrated the Passover along with the thousands of pilgrims without being recognized.

But he chose to ride on the back of an ass, and that act, that humble processional, immediately reminded the Jewish people of one of their favorite prophetic passages: "Lo, your king comes to you: triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." They couldn't have missed the identification. He knew what they would think. He knew that they would quickly and enthusiastically welcome him as the promised Messiah, but that their welcome would be based on a hope for a political leader who would overturn the authority of Rome. He knew what the authorities would think about that: he knew that the people would turn against him as vigorously as they welcomed him, when they discovered that he had no intention of being a Messiah on their terms.

He knew that his disciples did not understand his actions, and that in panic they would desert him. He knew that at the end of it all there was a cross. There could be no other way. Yet he made the decision, lonely, agonizing, ambiguous, and followed it through to its bitter end.

For Jesus, the decision to go to Jerusalem meant going from the place of comparative safety to the place of danger; from the place of relative tranquility to the center of the storm. That was the difference between Galilee, a place of soft rolling hills and gentle people, and Jerusalem, the historic capital and hub of the nation's political, economic and religious life. It would have been so easy to stay in Capernaum, cultivating his people, developing his disciples, traveling from village to village. Instead he chose to go to the city, and we can feel that for him it was a very personal, very intense matter, a matter of integrity. He would not besatisfied to remain on the periphery of life, geographic or any other way. His claim, his sensitivity, his conviction, sooner or later would have to confront the heart of his people - the sophisticated center of life.

The implications of this are, of course, quite clear. One gets the distinct impression that his church, in the 20th century would be appalled at his actions. One gets the distinct impression that religious people are still ready to crucify the man who confronts the living, breathing center of our common life with the radical claim of the Gospel.

But for now the point is that he made his decision, an adamant young man, alone in his commitment, and even as he made it, he knew that it would cost him his life.

But the biggest risk of all, the risk that never occurred to me until I read the words of Dag Hammarskjold was that the end might be a "death without significance". He was willing to put his life on the line. But was it worth it? Would anything come of it? Was it the right decision? How could he know that 20 centuries later the one unifying symbol of Western Civilization would be his cross? The terrible risk in deciding to walk straight towards his death is that he could not have known: it could possibly turn out to be a "death without significance." That is the final and ultimate risk.

The response of his disciples to all of this is most interesting. In

the first New Testament Lesson this morning we read that on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed and **afraid.** Amazed at the courage they were witnessing? Amazed because they didn't understand? Afraid for him or for their own safety? Yet they followed, hesitantly, full of anxiety, with a sense of dark foreboding at the consequences of their act. But they followed.

Many people never get that far: many people never cross that frontier between the safety of Galilee and the danger of Jerusalem. In fact, it is becoming apparent that most people prefer the staid comfort of neutrality rather than the risk of commitment to anything. "Let's not go to extremes, - let's not get involved," seems to be the keynote of a whole generation. But that's not life; existence perhaps, but not life. One individual put it this way: "If a man has nothing for which he is willing to die, he is already dead." Those are true and great words. And last week the man who said them was assassinated.

In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, Profiles in Courage, the late John F. Kennedy told the stories of great Americans who were not afraid to have opinions, to make decisions in the face of doubt and ambiguity, and to commit themselves to the consequences of their decisions. History is the story of these men, men who, one and all, were despised and hated for their courage. History is their vindication, and they will be remembered, and are remembered long after all the little men, who exist in the never-never land of neutrality, have been forgotten.

Last week a great American, a man of singular courage and integrity was killed. He was a man with a dream that is very dear to me, and I cannot help but share with you my own deep sense of personal loss. Few people who stand on the sidelines understood Martin Luther King. To them, he was a threat, a trouble maker, one who came to the city for the purpose of confrontation, and was greeted, more often than not, with violence. It was not, we must remember, violence of his making, for his followers, in a tragic commentary on our way of life, were trained carefully to fall to the ground, to protect their vital organs from the inevitable kicks, to shield their heads from the inevitable rocks and cans. And when the history of this era is written, if it is written by honest men, Martin Luther King will be remembered as the most eloquent spokesman of an idea the world never has taken very seriously - the idea he got from one who advised turning the other cheek, and loving one's enemies; the idea of non-violence.

But now he is dead, and his people are moved to return the violence which for 400 years their nation and fellow citizens have visited upon them, the violence which took his life. I mourn the passing of this man, because in the words of one television commentator, "White Americans have lost their best friend." I mourn for his people, his family, his friends and I urge you to pray for them.

I don't see how it is possible for Christian people to remember the events of Palm Sunday without seeing the obvious relationship between that drama and the drama which unfolded in Memphis this week. Commitment to any idea, any great cause, is risky business. We have seen again, that it may mean death. And depending on the response of the neutrals, the fence sitters, the spectators like you and me, it may be a "death without significance"; or it may be a death from which redemption, reconciliation become miracles of grace among us. That depends on us.

You see the great irony of this day, the great and continuing tragedy of Palm Sunday seen through the events of last week, is that men did not understand why Jesus made his decision; to a good many respectable neutral people he was indeed an "outside agitator." The great and abiding scandal of this day is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ had to confront the social, political, and economic structures symbolized by the city of Jerusalem, and that people in and out of the church still don't like that and still prefer the safe neutrality of the Galilees, the tranquil peripheries of life.

This society is full of people who are neutral about Jesus Christ, people who are "for" religion - in general, people who support the Church as long as it

remains in its corner, an impotent symbol of the past. And the Church itself is full of people who want a neutral, non-offensive religion, a religion that requires no sacrifice, no commitment, a religion that allows them their prejudices and stubbornness, a religion that asks nothing of them but will baptize them with meaningless piety whenever they are in need. The culture and the church itself want very much a neutral Gospel which refuses to get specific about anything, that, above all else, never ventures into confrontation with the established structures of the status quo.

One of the greatest preachers of our time: Harry Emerson Fosdick, put in these words: "Human nature being what it is, Christ is disturbing. Christians commonly interpret him in terms of his loveliness; we call him glorious names; but he himself said he came to cast fire upon the earth. To our human nature he is upsetting. Why must we be made miserable by the necessity of choosing either for him or against him? Would not life be easier if he had not come, so to challenge us with his demands?"

Fosdick goes on to suggest that the man who has never felt that way about Christ has never really taken him seriously. That is, until we have truly struggled with his demand, until we have personally experienced the risk and anxiety of commitment to him, until we have followed him with doubt and fear, dogging every step, we have neverreally come to grips with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Palm Sunday is not so much the celebration of triumphant entry as it is this: this coming to grips with the decision he made, and the decision we are required to make. He came into Jerusalem, an adamant young man: common sense would have dictated that he remain in the safety of Galilee; but he came. "A young man, adamant in his committed life...."

Sunday after Sunday we have heard the claims of the Gospel. We have found ourselves wanting to believe but not being able to believe. Day after day we have felt, in our hearts, the call to rise up and follow. And we have found ourselves on the raw edge of decision, afraid, amazed, wishing his presence - his call - would go away.

That is what Palm Sunday means to us. Let us muster our courage. Let us believe in spite of doubt. Let us act boldly in spite of risk and opposition and misunderstanding. Let us sing our "Hosannas" and then go from this place, following him wherever he leads, with faith forged in decision.

Amen.

Our father, we join the celebration of this day, welcoming our Lord to Jerusalem. Grant us, O God, to be honest about his coming: grant us the honesty to admit our doubts and resentments. Grant us true Faith, borne in this kind of honesty: grant us to leave the sidelines in courage, picking up the cross and following.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.